Obstructions and ESFR Sprinklers – Phase 2

FINAL REPORT

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FOREWORD

ESFR sprinklers are often installed in warehouses to avoid installation of in-rack sprinklers. Due to the unique discharge pattern of the ESFR sprinkler, obstructions located near the sprinkler can greatly affect the distribution of water and potentially sprinkler performance. The 2013 Edition of NFPA 13, *Standard for the Installation of Sprinkler Systems,* provides requirements which are intended to minimize the affect obstructions have on ESFR sprinkler performance.

Recent testing has been performed with obstructions that encroach upon the NFPA 13 obstruction limitations with successful results. The information from these tests, as well as information gathered from further testing, can be used as a technical basis for revisions to the NFPA 13 requirements.

The Fire Protection Research Foundation initiated this project to ultimately develop a tool that can be used to provide reliable analysis of the impact of obstructions on ESFR sprinkler performance. This tool and existing test data can be used as a basis for the NFPA 13 Technical Committees to develop new requirements and guidance for ESFR sprinklers.

The second phase of this project implemented the test plan developed in the first phase. The testing in Phase 2 focused on open web bar joist obstructions and identified remaining knowledge gaps for future phases.

The Fire Protection Research Foundation expresses gratitude to the report authors Garner A. Palenske, P.E., and William N. Fletcher, P.E., who are with Aon Fire Protection Engineering Corporation. The Foundation also expresses gratitude to Dan Steppan, the project director for Underwriters Laboratories (UL), who conducted the ADD and full scale testing at the UL facility. The Research Foundation appreciates the guidance provided by the Project Technical Panelists, the funding provided by the project sponsors, and all others that contributed to this research effort.

The content, opinions and conclusions contained in this report are solely those of the authors.

About the Fire Protection Research Foundation

The Fire Protection Research Foundation plans, manages, and communicates research on a broad range of fire safety issues in collaboration with scientists and laboratories around the world. The Foundation is an affiliate of NFPA.

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Founded in 1896, NFPA is a global, nonprofit organization devoted to eliminating death, injury, property and economic loss due to fire, electrical and related hazards. The association delivers information and knowledge through more than 300 consensus codes and standards, research, training, education, outreach and advocacy; and by partnering with others who share an interest in furthering the NFPA mission.

All NFPA codes and standards can be viewed online for free.

NFPA's membership totals more than 65,000 individuals around the world.

Keywords: ESFR sprinklers, obstructions, NFPA 13, warehouse protection, bar joists, bridging members

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Executive Summary

The objective of the Phase 2 research effort was to explore the threshold and tolerance of the early suppression fast response (ESFR) sprinklers to obstructions. This research utilized both intermediate scale testing and full-scale testing.

ESFR sprinklers were developed to meet the demands of high challenge storage fire scenarios and are a common choice to protect warehouses. Many aspects of ESFR sprinklers are unique compared to standard spray sprinklers. Paramount to ESFR sprinkler performance is the ability of the sprinkler to provide large amounts of water, in a specific discharge pattern, to the fire source in the incipient phase of fire development. Obstruction of the sprinkler discharge pattern could greatly affect the ability of the ESFR sprinkler to achieve fire suppression.

Actual delivered density (ADD) testing was utilized to identify the obstruction parameters for the full-scale testing. The variation in the performance of the various ESFR sprinkler models was established so that the results of the testing program would not be product specific. ADD testing was conducted, both with and without obstructions, to evaluate this issue.

Five large-scale fire tests were conducted to gather data to establish the acceptable threshold the ESFR sprinkler could be obstructed until the obstruction prevented the ESFR sprinkler from meeting its performance objectives. Each test was conducted using a nominal storage height of 30 feet and a ceiling height of 40 feet. The main storage array consisted of double-row rack storage and two single-row racks target arrays separated with four-foot aisles on both sides. Standard cartoned unexpanded Group A plastic test commodity was used in the testing. The ignition was located at the base of the storage array and horizontally offset approximately 2 feet from the obstructed sprinkler in the transverse flue space.

Due to a recent change to NFPA 13 regarding the use of K-14 ESFR sprinklers, the K-17 ESFR sprinkler was selected for this test series. Two full-scale tests were performed with bar joist obstructions and three tests were performed with a combination of bar joist and bridging member obstructions. Tables 1 and 2 outline the summary of these tests and their respective results.

Table 1. Test Parameters

Fire Test Number	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4	Test 5
Test Date	April 14, 2015	April 16, 2015	April 20, 2015	April 22, 2015	April 24, 2015
Test Parameters					
Storage Type	Double Row Rack				
Commodity Type	Cartoned Unexpanded Group A Plastic (Plastic Cups in Corrugated Boxes on Hardwood Pallets)				
Pallet Type	2 way entry, stringer, hardwood				
Nominal Storage Height (feet)	30				
Ceiling Height (feet)	40				
Nominal Clearance (feet)	10				
Aisle Width (feet)	4				
Ignition Location	Under One Sprinkler (offset)				
Sprinkler Systems	Ceiling Only (no in-rack sprinklers)				
Sprinkler Orientation	Pendent				
Deflector to Ceiling (inch)	14				
Sprinkler Spacing, sprinkler by branchline,	10 feet by 10 feet				
Temperature Rating (°F)	165				
Sprinkler Type	ESFR				
Nominal Sprinkler Discharge Coefficient K (gpm/psig $^{0.5}$)	16.8				
Nominal Discharge Density (gpm/ft^2)	1.21				
Nominal Discharge Pressure (psig)	52				
Primary Obstruction	36 inch deep steel joist, edge of lower chord 6 inches from centerline of sprinkler	30 inch deep steel joist, edge of lower chord 3 inches from centerline of sprinkler	36 inch deep steel joist, edge of lower chord 6 inches from centerline of sprinkler	36 inch deep steel joist, edge of lower chord 6 inches from centerline of sprinkler	22 inch deep steel joist, edge of lower chord 6 inches from centerline of sprinkler
Secondary Obstruction	None	None	1-1/2 inch by 1-1/2 inch bridging member; 1-1/2 inch away from sprinkler	1-1/2 inch by 1-1/2 inch bridging member; Centered below sprinkler	1-1/2 inch by 1-1/2 inch bridging member; Centered below sprinkler

Table 2. Test Results

Test Results					
Fire Test Number	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4	Test 5
Test Date	April 14, 2015	April 16, 2015	April 20, 2015	April 22, 2015	April 24, 2015
Primary Obstruction	36 inch deep steel joist, edge of lower chord 6 inches from centerline of sprinkler	30 inch deep steel joist, edge of lower chord 3 inches from centerline of sprinkler	36 inch deep steel joist, edge of lower chord 6 inches from centerline of sprinkler	36 inch deep steel joist, edge of lower chord 6 inches from centerline of sprinkler	22 inch deep steel joist, edge of lower chord 6 inches from centerline of sprinkler
Secondary Obstruction	None	None	1-1/2 inch by 1-1/2 inch bridging member; 1-1/2 inch away from sprinkler	1-1/2 inch by 1-1/2 inch bridging member; Centered below sprinkler	1-1/2 inch by 1-1/2 inch bridging member; Centered below sprinkler
Length of Test (minutes)	31	32	32	32	32
First Sprinkler Operation Time (min: sec)	0:56	1:42	1:19	1:11	1:01
Last Sprinkler Operation Time (min: sec)	6:08	7:37	1:19	1:11	6:42
Number of Operated Sprinklers	3	12	1	1	23
Peak Gas Temperature at Ceiling Above Ignition (°F)	294	406[1]	238	250	1264
Maximum 1 minute Average Gas Temperature at Ceiling Above Ignition (°F)	129	256*	114	115	979
Peak Steel Temperature at Ceiling Above Ignition (°F)	128	157*	86	84	248
Maximum 1 minute Average Steel Temperature at Ceiling Above Ignition (°F)	126	157*	85	83	246
Ignition Time of Target Array (min: sec)	3:36 (North Target)	3:24 (North Target)	N/A	N/A	2:26 (North Target)
Fire Travel to Extremities of Test Array	No	No	No	No	Yes (North Target)

From the full-scale fire tests that were conducted, the following conclusions can be made:

- A K-17 ESFR sprinkler obstructed by a bar joist with a 6-inch offset from the closest edge of the obstruction and without a horizontal bridging member produced acceptable results.
- A K-17 ESFR sprinkler obstructed by a bar joist with a 3-inch offset from the closest edge of the obstruction and without a horizontal bridging member controlled the fire with 12 sprinklers activating.
- Tests 3 and 4 showed that regardless of horizontal offset a bridging member with a vertical separation of 19.5 inches on a 36-inch deep bar joist with a 6-inch offset provides acceptable results.

[1] Due to a data system issue, data was taken at 20 second intervals during Test 2. The values reported are the peak and one minute maximum recorded values and likely not the true peak and time average maximum values.

- The failure of Test 5 can be attributed to the vertical proximity of the bridging member to the sprinkler. This test illustrated that a bridging member directly underneath the sprinkler with a vertical separation of 6 inches produced unacceptable results.

- The fire growth rates discussed in Report Section 8.3 show that the fire in Test 2 was not comparable to the other four fires and should be repeated.

The following additional testing is recommended:

- Testing of bridging members on different bar joist depths to increase the understanding of the vertical distance effects of the obstructions

- A K-14 ESFR sprinkler test with the worst-case successful obstruction arrangement found during the K-17 ESFR testing.

- ADD testing to evaluate various obstructions scenarios prior to full-scale testing.

- Evaluate the results of Test 2 by retesting the obstruction scenario at full-scale or by other means such as intermediate scale testing methods.

- Miscellaneous obstruction tests